

# U.S. Limits Saigon Air Force Potential



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A South Vietnamese Air Force major, left, with two cadets he is training to be pilots

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 19 — The United States, while turning the South Vietnamese Air Force into one of the largest in the world, is at the same time sharply limiting its tactical and strategic capabilities on the assumption that the war will continue to wind down.

At the strength and training levels planned for 1974, the South Vietnamese will still be

unable to perform some key tasks in the air. They will be unable to support any heavy requirement by their army for helicopters to lift soldiers into and out of battle. They will be unable to assume the present United States role of strategic bombing of supply trails and base areas beyond the borders.

While remaining a question for future decision, a United States determination that those bombing and support functions were still essential would thus

require the continuation of a large American air presence in Southeast Asia.

Indeed, according to the chief American adviser to the South Vietnamese Air Force, Brig. Gen. James H. Watkins, when it reaches its planned strength, "there's really no way it can take over all the things the U. S. Air Force is doing here."

Two weeks' observation of Vietnamese units, flights on

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MEMBERS OF A GROWING FORCE: South Vietnamese Air Force members being trained for flying and technical posts on parade at Nha Trang

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bombing missions and interviews with officers and their American advisers lead to the conclusion that the most technical of all the military forces being "Vietnamized" is performing well but that it has fundamental limitations.

#### Assumptions and Misgivings

The limitations, deliberately imposed by military-assistance officers here and in Washington, appear to be based on some precarious assumptions as well as on misgivings about the Vietnamese.

The principal assumptions, a high American civilian official said in an interview, are these: that large-scale enemy activity in South Vietnam will remain at its present low level, that the South Vietnamese Army will be able to get by on fewer helicopters than it does now—it relies on the United States to fill the gaps—and that requirements for air support by bombers inside the country will continue to diminish.

Another assumption is that the intensive American bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and of North Vietnamese sanctuaries there and in Cambodia—current efforts that have been credited, in part, with reducing the level of hostilities in Vietnam—will no longer be necessary when the Vietnamese Air Force is fully expanded by 1974. If it turns out to be necessary still, the expectation is that the United States will be around to do the job from bases in Thailand.

Those assumptions, in turn, are based on the forecast that the war as now conducted will be over by the mid-nineteen-seventies and that the Vietnamese Air Force should then be equipped to contend with smaller-scale cleanup operations entirely in South Vietnam.

#### Strengths and Weaknesses

As General Watkins said in an interview: "I think if you look at the in-country job, it can do all there is to be done. If you throw the air force into a better defended enemy environment, then it's different."

He added that there were no current plans to give the South Vietnamese aircraft faster or more advanced than the propeller-driven cargo planes, jet helicopters and limited-range A-37 light attack jet bombers and F-5 jet fighters they have or are scheduled to get.

The result, he said, is that "they won't have an air-defense capability in the sense we are accustomed to" and that they will have no significant capability for strategic bombing.

#### Deficient in Fast Jets

He and other officials say that the United States is denying such equipment because of doubts about whether the South Vietnamese could afford to operate larger planes, about whether they could maintain and repair more complicated craft and, not least, about what they might do if they had them.

One reason for denying repeated requests for faster, longer-range bombers, according to the high civilian official, is that the Vietnamese would be able to use them against North Vietnam, "and then the fat would be in the fire."

The South Vietnamese Air Force far surpasses the North Vietnamese one in everything except fast jet fighter-bombers

and interceptors. It has 40,000 men and 850 planes and helicopters in 36 squadrons. In 1968, at the beginning of the buildup, it had 18,500 men, 350 mostly obsolete aircraft and 20 squadrons, only one of them with jets.

By 1974, according to United States officers, the force will have 50,000 men and 1,200 aircraft—including jet and propeller-driven transports and fighters and 500 to 600 helicopters—in 50 squadrons.

What it will be expected to do then, General Watkins and others advisers say, is to fly most of the air strikes against enemy positions in South Vietnam and fill many of the helicopter transportation requirements for the half-million-man South Vietnamese Army, which has been trained in American airmobile tactics requiring helicopters but has none of its own. The air force will also have to defend itself against the possibility of limited air attacks from North Vietnam and to keep its planes running.

The backbone of the jet bomber fleet is the Cessna A-37 Dragonfly light attack plane; There are five squadrons, normally of 24 planes each.

The Vietnamese have not been too happy with the craft, mainly because it is small and relatively slow, with a maximum speed under 500 miles an hour. Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, who still holds the rank of air vice marshal and visits nearly every air installation frequently, termed the plane obsolete last month and said: "This is for women, you know. This is no fighter plane."

#### One Squadron of Fighters

It was designed for the United States Air Force for counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam, not as a fighter, and it cannot be used safely against targets protected by anti-aircraft concentrations.

The other jet used by the Vietnamese, and their only supersonic plane, is the Northrop F-5 Freedom Fighter, which has a 1,300-mile range. There is only one squadron of the twin-jet planes; at least one more squadron, of a faster, more advanced version, the F-5E, is planned, to give the Vietnamese minimal air-defense capability against North Vietnamese MIG-21's. But the plane has not been built, American officers say, and probably will not be ready until next year at the earliest.

The bulk of the helicopter fleet is a mixture of old and more recent Hueys, in gunship and troop-carrying versions, but there are no more modern and effective craft. United States Army copters still fly about half the missions for Vietnamese soldiers, even in the Mekong Delta, where there are no American ground combat forces and where the Vietnamese have nearly all the helicopters they are going to get.

Though the South Vietnamese may continue to rely on the United States forces for support and advice, American troops and airmen will continue to be withdrawn, it is presumed, until a level of about 50,000 is reached by the end of 1972. The United States Air Force now has 40,000 men and a force of supersonic fighters and bombers and cargo planes at five bases in South Vietnam, and planes fly missions from the Seventh Fleet carrier force in the Gulf of Tonkin. There

are some 3,000 American helicopters.

At bases in Thailand there will still be 30,000 American airmen, two tactical fighter wings and a tactical reconnaissance wing, plus the B-52's used in strategic bombing.

Vietnamese pilots for jets and helicopters are trained in the United States and training and repair manuals are in English. Even lower-ranking enlisted men must undergo time-consuming language instruction. Some pilots confess that their understanding of English is imperfect, especially over the radio, which leads to confusion and occasional accidents.

The biggest limitation on the South Vietnamese Air Force is likely to be money. The \$250,000 helicopters and the \$400,000 A-37's are being provided now, and so are replacements for those lost in battle, but when the expansion and improvement are completed, the Vietnamese may be on their own.

Eventual arrangements for the replacement of damaged craft are uncertain, but an aid official said: "There are precedents for continuing to guarantee that we'll maintain their air force up to strength after we're gone."

Within its limitations the air force has been making steady progress—though the statistics may be misleading—in assuming a large part of the air-support role that was the responsibility of the United States Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps in earlier stages of the war.

Early this month the Secretary of the Air Force, Robert C. Seamans Jr. said that American air missions had been halved over the last year and that the South Vietnamese had been flying more than half the internal sorties since December.

#### Gain is Only Apparent

Available figures actually indicate that the cutback in American missions had little to do with the growth of the South Vietnamese force. The United States has been flying steadily fewer missions over the last three years but the average number of daily strikes by the Vietnamese in recent months is about the same as it was in 1968.

In some areas the Vietnamese fly nearly all the bombing missions now from a single, narrow, 6,000-foot runway at the Binhthuy air base near Cantho.

On one such missions Capt. Thai Phuong Thuy dropped six bombs from his A-37 on bunkers only 300 yards from South Vietnamese troops perched on a mountain near the Cambodian border beside the Gulf of Thailand.

Coming back for a landing after the usual 45-minute mission, he said, "I like this plane, but our old propeller-driven A-1 bombers can carry a lot more bombs—14—and they're stronger."

The pilots at Binhthuy carry only six bombs, totaling 2,000 pounds, because they must maintain a fuel reserve to fly to Saigon in case something happens to their runway.

Captain Thuy, like his colleagues, speaks fair English and got his flight training in the United States. His superior, Col. Nguyen Huy Anh, commander of the Fourth Air Division at Binhthuy, trained in France in the early nineteen-fifties and has been to the United States many times.

"The A-37 is fast, very com-

fortable and can turn around and be reloaded very quickly," the colonel said. "But we would prefer to have some jets with more bomb-loading capacity so we don't have to come back so soon."

The principal obstacle in the way of filling such requests, beside the fact that the Americans think the Vietnamese do not really need such planes, is that maintenance would be beyond their capabilities. Even with the jets and helicopters the Vietnamese have—the A-37 is regarded as ideal because it is relatively simple to maintain and squat enough so that men do not have to climb on scaffolds to service it—they have difficulties with maintenance and repair.

A principal task is building a system that can supply spare parts when needed. Vietnamese

technician say that spare parts take months and months to move from the depot at Bienhoa and that aircraft are often idle just for want of a simple component.

Most technicians used to be trained in the United States, but the center at Soctrang now graduates more than 7,000 a year.

The commander of the advisers at the center, Col. Elvin O. Wyatt, said, "I think if we were just to pull out of here and make them do it themselves, they could, but it's just too critical."

One example of the situation is the need to translate 6,000 pages of technical manuals, of which only a little has been done. As Colonel Wyatt remarked, the American technical advisers are going to have to be there for a long time.